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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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What a week! For the first time this summer, I can actually say that it was a beautiful one - no rain at all! A perfect week - all sun, not too hot, and no chance for a sprinkle. Summer at its finest.

We started the week off taking a trek to Maine to take my father out to lunch to celebrate his 88th birthday. The trip up and back was a total disaster due to traffic problems, but we survived. It was good to see my father again, so it was all worth it.

And then the week ended with our psycho neighbor finally being evicted from her home after a two-year legal battle by her ex-husband! Now this woman, who we have known for 11 years, as always a little flaky, but these past couple of months have been something! From dawn to dusk, almost every day, she would be out in the front yard moving things around in some lame attempt to "blockade" the entire front of the property. This included moving some furniture out from the house. All day long she would rearrange things to try and improve her barricade. It never dawned on her that if she could move about freely, others could as well!

The police had been called in at times because she would go off in vocal tirades at neighbors and passer-bys. There had been numerous complaints filed by numerous neighbors. The house was on the market, but she kept hiding the realtor signs. She put up her own signs all over the property, but nothing to do with a "for sale" topic. She was getting worse as the weeks went on.

Well yesterday, I happened to look out the window and saw a couple of police cars out front. Apparently she she had been served with a final eviction notice and forced off of the property. The "show" that she put on as a result were entertaining, but sad. The woman needed help, but she just wasn't interested. After a few hours, she had called someone who came along to help her - and she left.

Today I saw the husband and talked to him for awhile. Hopefully things will go better for him. There's a large dumpster sitting in the driveway now, with about a month of work to do to get the house back into shape again. I really feel badly for him and the three kids. But now there's a chance for normalcy for everyone, but who knows what will happen to the one who needs help the most! Time will tell...

So, looking forward to a nice weekend, and a quiet one for a change. The unofficial end of summer is rapidly approaching, so I want to enjoy as many of these nice days as possible!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Again we're faced with a dribble of messages in the NewsGroup, and I doubt we'll be seeing much of a change, at least until autumn sets in. Meanwhile, in the real world, I've lost a friend to the ravages of time.

George was a friend's father. I first met him more than 30 years ago. His son nicknamed him 'The Yeti', since he was a tall, wide man, had a fairly full head of white hair and was, under most circumstances, quite abominable.

George and I disagreed on just about everything, and I often wondered if he held me in any esteem at all, but more important than what he thought of me was what I thought of him, since one can never really know the mind and thoughts of another. While he was politically reactionary and religiously... well, let's call it 'over the top', he had a good heart.

After high school graduation, his son joined the Coast Guard and ended up on a Search and Rescue team in Kodiak Alaska. We lived literally on the other side of the continent, so it wasn't like he could come home for the weekends or anything.

Another friend and I would stop by their house (usually on the way to a night of bar-hopping and trouble-making) to chat and catch up for a while. George always looked forward to our visits, not because of us, but because it meant that his son would be calling shortly after we left. We could never figure out why this happened, but it always worked out that his son would call within 30 minutes of us leaving.

As you can imagine, once we were a few minutes into a visit, the Yeti would start dropping hints about us leaving. It wasn't because he didn't want us there... we always knew that we were welcome in his house... but Yeti knew that the countdown to his son calling didn't start until we left.

Shortly after that, they sold the house and moved to Florida and their son moved to New Hampshire. I'd see my buddy on occasion... he'd stop by sometimes en route from NH to FL.. but I haven't seen his parents in almost 30 years now. We've kept in touch as well as we could with Christmas cards and such, but I haven't seen them face-to-face in a very long time.

Well, the Yeti is gone now, and there are two observations I've made in the past couple of days...

First, two scamsters claimed to have found the carcass of a ’Bigfoot’ in Georgia... not all that far from where Yeti had settled in the Jacksonville, Fl area. Bigfoot, in case you don’t know, is the American version of the Himalayan Yeti, or abominable snowman.

Second of all, the memorial service for Yeti is being held today in Florida... just as Tropical Storm Fay treats the area to massive wind and rain. Just like George... plenty of bluster and blow.

Amazing how things like that work out, huh?

Well folks, there aren’t enough messages to make a decent column, so we’re going to call it quits here and hope for a better week next time around.

Tune in next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - EA Declines Extension!
  """"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Wii Wand Patent Suit!
  New Version of PSP!
  And much more!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
  """""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""

EA Declines To Extend Take-Two Bid Deadline

The Electronic Arts, Take-Two Interactive Software acquisition drama continues as the mammoth video-game publisher said it won’t extend a Monday deadline for its $2 billion offer to buy Take-Two, maker of the Grand Theft Auto franchise series.

It may not be as dramatic as the Microsoft and Yahoo story, but EA and Take-Two have danced a few rounds - and they apparently aren’t done dancing.

Take-Two on Monday confirmed that it expects to sign a confidentiality agreement with EA that allows the gaming giant to enter into Take-Two’s formal process to evaluate strategic alternatives. Take-Two said it is keeping lines of communication with EA open as part of a process to "maximize value" for its stockholders.

"We welcome EA into our formal process and look forward to demonstrating to their board the significant strides made by Take-Two since they last undertook a detailed review of our business in early 2007," said Strauss Zelnick, chairman of Take-Two. "Our board remains unwavering in its belief that EA's unsolicited conditional tender offer of $25.74 per share was inadequate and undervalued Take-Two's world-class entertainment franchises and our strong operational and financial performance."

Headquartered in New York City, Take-Two publishes and develops products through several of its labels, including Rockstar Games, 2K Games, 2K Sports, and 2K Play. The company is perhaps best known for its Grand Theft Auto series, but also has such hits as BioShock. EA isn't willing to call it quits on the deal, but agreeing on a price is the challenge.

"This deal comes down to leverage and agreeing on a price. At least for the moment, EA doesn't have a lot of leverage over Take-Two, and Take-Two doesn't like the price EA has offered," said Mike Goodman, an analyst at The Yankee Group. "Take-Two is flying high right now as a result of the success of Grand Theft Auto. That makes it tougher to make a deal happen without paying a premium that blows them away."

There are two video-game publishers that have lowered their sales variability, Goodman continued. Those companies are EA and Activision. Thanks to its sheer scale, EA is not dependent on any given title or handful of titles. Take-Two, by contrast, has a few hit titles but lacks scale. That translates to up-and-down, ebb-and-flow success. That could cause Take-Two to come to an agreement with EA at some point.

"Everybody has a number. The question is, will EA pay the price in order to get Take-Two? Without knowing what Take-Two's magic number is, it's hard to gauge. Is it a 20 percent premium? Is it a 50 percent premium?" Goodman asks. "It is a premium over their current market valuation, but only the boards of directors of these companies ultimately know the answer to what that number is."

Sony Says To Launch New Version of PSP Handheld

Consumer electronics giant Sony announced a new version of its Playstation Portable handheld games console that can be used as a telephone, to go on sale in Europe and the United States in mid-October.

The Playstation Portable 3000, which has been the subject of speculation on technology websites, will have a built-in microphone and a new screen which has more colors and is better suited for use outdoors, Sony said at a video games convention in Leipzig, Germany on Wednesday.

The PSP already supports the software program Skype, which enables users to make free telephone calls over the internet, but the new PSP, with built-in microphone, will make the process easier, Sony says.

"We believe that this will establish the PSP as a viable communication device," said David Reeves, president of Sony Computer Entertainment Europe.

The PSP 3000 will retail for 199 euros ($294), compared to 169 euros for the current slim version of the PSP, which will remain on sale.

Sony also said it would launch a version of its flagship Playstation 3 console with a 160 gigabyte hard drive to store more downloaded content and video, to retail for 449 euros on October 31. including 70 euros credit for downloads.

A version of the PS3 with an 80 gigabyte hard-drive will go on sale for 399 euros later in August, Sony said.

Music videos streamed over the internet would soon be available free to the PS3, while a music and video download service modeled on its U.S. version should be available across Europe by the third quarter of 2009, the company added.

All Hail to ’Space Invaders’ at Europe’s Biggest Games Show

Europe’s biggest games convention marks 30 years since "Space Invaders" this week with a homage to the alien ’shoot-em-up’ as well as 500 exhibitors showing how far the industry has come since then.

"Space Invaders" first hit gaming arcades in 1978, setting players the challenge of shooting a swarm of hostile extraterrestials descending at an ever increasing pace - before they destroyed you.

The hugely popular game, released a year after the "Star Wars" movie, was "revolutionary," according to organisers of the Leipzig GC Games Convention in Germany starting on Wednesday, and changed the nature of video games for ever.

"This might appear a simple feature to a modern audience but ... from then on, you didn’t only play against the machine but also against human opponents," the organisers say.

And according to the creator of the "Invaders!" interactive installation at the GC, French-US artist Douglas Edric Stanley, the game can even be seen as an "unusual ... though obvious" metaphor for the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"Space Invaders" though is not the main reason why some 200,000 people are expected to make the journey to the convention in the east German city of Leipzig between August 21 and August 24.

Held for the seventh time in Leipzig, 200 kilometres (125 miles) southwest of Berlin, the GC has exhibitors from more than 40 countries, including all the big names in the industry, except Nintendo, in four halls and an outdoor area.

According to the German tech industry association Bitkom, gamers in Germany alone are expected to spend 2.6 billion euros (3.8 billion dollars) on consoles and games this year, 13 percent more than in 2007.

"Today the games market ... is at least as important as other branches of the entertainment sector like film or music. With one difference: the games market is booming," Bitkom said ahead of the convention.

And in Germany at least, the games industry is slowly gaining respect, making it out of teenagers’ bedrooms and overcoming criticism for being

too violent to win widespread popularity.

Only last week, the German Cultural Council deigned to allow the country’s games development association GAME to become a member, thereby officially making the industry part of the country’s mainstream cultural establishment.

German MPs have even decided to create a special "Oscars" awards for video games, with 10 categories and 600,000 euros worth of prizes, starting in 2009.

"Of course some games are bloody and they should not be in the hands of children. But that does nothing to change their aesthetic qualities," the Council’s head, Olaf Zimmermann, told AFP.

The "Grand Theft Auto" series, which has sold about 70 million copies worldwide, is the most notorious, coming under fire for its graphic depiction of casual violence, drug dealing and prostitution.

Thai police even went as far as banning it earlier this month after a disturbed teenager allegedly killed a Bangkok taxi driver apparently inspired by the game in which players kill people and steal cars to win points.

Organisers of the GC will be hoping visitors will be more law-abiding.

Video Games Not All Bad, Psychologists Say

Playing video games improves manual dexterity among surgeons, making them faster and less likely to make mistakes, US researchers have said.

The findings were contained in a raft of research about how video games effect the people who play them, discussed Sunday at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association in Boston.

"The big picture is that there are several dimensions in which games have effects," including their content, how they are played, and how much, said psychologist Douglas Gentile of Iowa State University.

"This means that games are not ’good’ or ’bad’ but are powerful educational tools and have many effects we might not have expected they could."

Gentile presented several studies on video games including one involving 33 surgeons specializing in laparoscopy, the use of a thin lighted tube to inspect and treat various conditions in the pelvic and abdominal cavities.

Laparoscopic surgeons who played video games were 27 percent faster at advanced surgical procedures, and made 37 percent fewer errors, compared to their non-gaming colleagues, the study found.

Studies involving high school and college students confirmed previous findings about the social effects of playing violent video games, the Iowa State researchers said.

Students who played violent games were more hostile, less forgiving, and

more apt to view violence as normal, than peers who played non-violent games.

But students who played "prosocial" games got into fewer fights at school and were more helpful to other students, the researchers reported.

Yet another study, at Fordham University, measured the effect of learning a new video game on problem-solving skills in middle-school-age children and found that "playing video games can improve cognitive and perceptual skills."

"Certain types of video games can have beneficial effects improving gamers' dexterity as well as their ability to problem-solve -- attributes that have proven useful not only to students but to surgeons," the researchers found.

U.S. Company Sues Nintendo in Wii Wand Patent Suit

Nintendo's hit Wii console with its wandlike remote controller has been targeted in patent infringement complaints by a U.S. technology company.

Hillcrest Laboratories, based in Rockville, Md., has filed a complaint with the U.S. International Trade Commission in Washington D.C., and a patent infringement lawsuit in the U.S. District Court in Maryland against Nintendo Corp., the company said in a statement Wednesday.

Kyoto-based Nintendo spokesman Yasuhiro Minagawa said Thursday the Japanese video game company has not yet received the lawsuit and had no comment.

Hillcrest is accusing Nintendo of infringement in four patents dealing with technology for a handheld three-dimensional pointing device and a display interface system for organizing graphic content on a TV, it said.

"While Hillcrest Labs has a great deal of respect for Nintendo and the Wii, Hillcrest Labs believes that Nintendo is in clear violation of its patents and has taken this action to protect its intellectual property rights," it said.

The Wii console has been a big hit around the world, selling a cumulative 29.6 million worldwide since its arrival in late 2006.

With its trademark wandlike remove controller, which users have dubbed "Wiimote," the Wii has scored success against the PlayStation 3 from Japanese rival Sony Corp., which went on sale about the same time, as well as against the Xbox 360 from Microsoft Corp.

Unlike old-style games that require players to push a complex combination of buttons, Wii comes with an easy-to-use remote to swing around like a tennis racket or fishing pole. The machine has proven appealing to relative newcomers to gaming, including women and the elderly.

Nintendo - which also makes the Nintendo DS handheld machine and Pokemon and Super Mario game software - aims to sell 25 million Wii consoles in the fiscal year through March 2009.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

HP Introduces Lightweight Business Laptops

Hewlett-Packard Co has announced a line of portable lightweight computers aimed at business travelers to compete with a product range announced by rival Dell Inc last week.

HP said on Monday that the lineup included the EliteBook 2530p, which is the smallest and lightest of its computers with a weight of just over 3 pounds and an extended battery life.

The company said its EliteBook 2730p is an ultra-thin computer that converts to a touch-screen pen-based tablet computer with a twist of its screen and weighs 3.7 pounds.

HP said it expected the HP EliteBook 2530p and HP EliteBook 2730p to become available by early September, with estimated prices of $1,499 and $1,670, respectively.

Judge Backs Hackers in Boston Subway Dispute

Three students from the elite Massachusetts Institute of Technology who found a way to hack into Boston's transit system to get free rides can talk publicly about the security flaw, a court ruled on Tuesday in a decision hailed as a victory for academic freedom.

The students from the university, regarded as one of the world's top science and engineering schools, raised the ire of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority with a paper demonstrating how someone could work around flaws in Boston's "Charlie Card" automated fare system.

They had planned to present the paper, which showed how anyone could take thousands of free rides on subways and buses, at a hackers conference in Las Vegas this month.

The MBTA sued to block that presentation, contending that it would violate U.S. laws on computer fraud. MBTA officials said they wanted to stop the students from publicly exposing the security flaws before the transit authority had a chance to review them.

U.S. District Court Judge George O'Toole in Boston federal court found that presenting an academic paper would not violate computer fraud laws.

"We need academic freedom and an ability to talk about these things, without fearing legal consequences," said Carol Rose, executive director

of the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, which helped to defend the students.

"The marketplace of ideas does not work when we have gag orders imposed on our scientists," she added.

The three undergraduates - Zack Anderson, R.J. Ryan and Alessandro Chiesa - received top marks for their paper exposing the security flaw.

The hack worked by reprogramming the system’s fare cards so they appeared to have more value, so a hacker could take a card that had just enough credits for a few rides and multiply that to work for hundreds of rides.

The students said they had planned to withhold key details in the Las Vegas presentation to prevent anyone in the audience from taking advantage of the security weakness.

MBTA General Manager Daniel Grabauskas said in a statement that the students had said the lawsuit was an obstacle to talks with the agency. "Now that the court proceedings are behind us, I renew my invitation to the students to sit down with us and discuss their findings," he said.

Located across the Charles River from Boston, MIT’s students are known for their love of pranks - "hacks" in the school’s vernacular - that show off their engineering skills.

Among the most famous was a 2006 incident in which students placed a 25-foot (7.6-meter)-long fire truck atop the dome of a campus library building.

FCC’s Martin Wants Broadband Across USA

High-speed Internet access is so important to the welfare of U.S. consumers that America can’t afford not to offer it - free of charge - to anybody who wants it, Federal Communications Commission Chairman Kevin Martin says.

"There’s a social obligation in making sure everybody can participate in the next generation of broadband services because, increasingly, that’s what people want," he says.

Martin hopes to use a chunk of wireless airwaves due to hit the auction block next year to help turn his vision into reality. Some cellphone operators are objecting.

As FCC chairman, Martin is responsible for protecting the interests of U.S. consumers. The FCC has regulatory sway over a broad swath of U.S. business, including cable and broadcast TV, radio, telecommunications and wireless. Martin sat down with USA TODAY to talk about some of the biggest consumer issues facing America. Broadband Internet access is at the top of his list.

"More and more people expect and demand to have access to the Internet and new wireless technologies," Martin says. "It is important that the (FCC) try to find new ways to address" those needs.

The way Martin sees it, broadband is quickly becoming what copper phone lines were for decades: the main means of communication for millions of Americans.

As people turn to the Internet for work, play, telemedicine, education and more, Martin says, it’s incumbent on U.S. regulators to make sure no one gets left behind. Ditto for cutting-edge wireless technologies, which have the ability to deliver a circus of advanced new services, including the mobile Web.

Consumers living in rural areas are one of Martin’s biggest concerns. In these areas, he says, dial-up and satellite-based Internet still rule. Owing to technical limitations, they don’t offer enough speed to handle advanced, interactive services.

People who live in densely populated areas, on the other hand, can pick from an array of high-speed options, including DSL and cable modem services.

No matter where, Martin says, he worries about availability and cost of high-speed services. Broadband runs about $40 a month, on average, though you’ll pay a lot more for faster speeds.

Only 38% of rural households are broadband customers, according to a Communications Workers of America report. For urban and suburban areas, the numbers are much higher: 57% and 60%, respectively.

Cost is a big factor, according to the report. Among households with incomes of $100,000 or more, 85% subscribe. The figure drops to 25% for households with incomes of less than $20,000.

Martin wants to use a block of wireless spectrum to help bridge the gap. By attaching a "free broadband" condition to the sale of the spectrum, known as AWS-3 (for advanced wireless services-3), Martin thinks he can help drive broadband adoption in rural areas in particular. Only 25% of network capacity would have to be reserved for free broadband. The rest could be used to provide premium broadband services.

Some cellphone providers are howling, none louder than T-Mobile. The company paid $4 billion two years ago to buy AWS-1 spectrum, which abuts the AWS-3 spectrum.

While the FCC’s goal of providing broadband alternatives for rural customers is "noble," the approach would cause service disruptions for T-Mobile’s data customers, says Cole Brodman, T-Mobile’s chief technology officer.

"The FCC has an obligation to make sure that their spectrum policy allows for people who bought spectrum to be protected," he says.

Milo Medin, founder and chairman of M2Z, a start-up that first proposed the "free broadband" idea and plans to bid for the spectrum, says T-Mobile’s problem is self-inflicted. He says T-Mobile is using handset "filters" and antennas that "read" signals in the adjoining AWS-3 zone, which could result in interference problems.

Brodman counters that the issue isn’t that simple. If T-Mobile doesn’t prevail, he says, the company would have to "work it out" with the AWS-3 winner or perhaps bid on the spectrum itself.

Martin says FCC engineers are studying the interference issue.

As for the high cost of broadband generally, Martin says he'd like to find a way to use a very old federal subsidy - the universal service fund - to ease costs for lower-income people. The fund, currently about $6 billion a year, is used to help keep basic phone service cheap. Rural phone companies, which use that money to help offset their costs, would likely resist such a plan.

Martin says it's just common sense. With so many cutting the cord and going wireless, it's far more important "to make sure we're spending that money in a way that better reflects the actual usage habits of Americans today."

Comcast Proposes 'Fair Share' Internet Traffic Control

Following a Federal Communications Commission ruling that Comcast blocked Internet traffic and ordering the company to submit a compliance plan about how it intends to stop "discriminatory management practices," Comcast is planning a new traffic-managing system.

Called Fair Share, the system is intended to limit the heaviest Internet users over short periods of time.

In an interview with Bloomberg news service on Wednesday, Mitch Bowling, Comcast senior vice president and general manager of online services, described the proposed "time-out" mechanism. Users who reach the top download limits will have their bandwidth reduced to DSL speeds for 10- to 20-minute periods, after which it would return to normal.

The new approach, he said, will move toward looking at congestion issues as triggers for bandwidth management, rather than at the kinds of applications being used, such as the peer-to-peer application BitTorrent.

At the beginning of this month, the FCC found the cable company used "unreasonable network-management practices" in blocking P2P programs such as BitTorrent, and that it had repeatedly changed its story when asked by the FCC to explain its actions. It gave the company 30 days to provide a plan to change this practice by the end of the year.

News media had reported that Comcast was secretly blocking users' P2P traffic, and two consumer-advocacy groups, Free Press and Public Knowledge, filed a complaint which led to the FCC decision.

Larry Hettick, an analyst with industry research firm Current Analysis, said the three most important things Comcast needs to do is provide a policy that is "clear, reasonable and published."

One of the main reasons the cable company "got into hot water with the FCC," he said, was because it was reducing bandwidth for users without telling them and without making clear what the policy was.

As for the specific approach Comcast is proposing, he said that "as a consumer, if I downloaded 90 percent of a movie and then got a time-out that reduced my bandwidth, I'd have to start over - and that would not make me happy."

Hettick pointed to an approach used by satellite-service provider HughesNet. Depending on the speed you sign up for, he said, you get a certain amount of data downloading per 24-hour cycle. "For example," he said, "if it's a T1 level, you get 500 megabytes of downloading per day."

If you exceed your download threshold for a given cycle, he said, you're "rate limited" - downgraded - to dial-up line speed for the remainder of that cycle. But there is a provision for unlimited downloading between 3 a.m. and 5 a.m., so a user can set a download manager to utilize those times.

Newegg Stops Collecting NY Sales Tax

Consumer electronics retailer Newegg announced Friday that it would no longer comply with a New York state law requiring the collection of online sales tax.

"After careful review and consideration, we are pleased to inform you that we have stopped collecting New York sales tax, effective August 21, 2008," Newegg spokesman Bernard Luthi wrote in a Friday e-mail to customers. "This decision was driven by your direct and candid feedback and our continued commitment to you as our valued customers."

New York lawmakers approved a budget package in April that includes a bill requiring online stores like Amazon.com and Newegg to collect sales tax. The state, which has been struggling to with budget issues, stands to take in up to $50 million in unpaid taxes.

Consumers who purchase items online are largely exempt from state taxes they might incur with in-store purchases. Technically, customers are supposed to report online purchases and pay taxes on them, but most people fail to do that.

Newegg complied with the law when it went into effect on June 1.

"While Newegg no longer charges sales tax to its New York customers, you may still have an obligation to pay New York State use tax on your purchases," Luthi warned.

In May, Amazon sued the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance (DTF), claiming the bill is unconstitutional.

Though Amazon's headquarters are in Seattle, New York officials argued that the company's affiliate program gives it a presence in New York. The program allows customers with Web sites to put an Amazon icon on their sites that advertise a particular product. If someone clicks through and makes a purchase, the webmaster gets a small cut.

Amazon said in its suit that affiliates "do not solicit or consummate sales on behalf of Amazon and are not authorized to act as Amazon's agents." They operate independently from Amazon, and should not be considered a brick and mortar extension of the site.

The case is still ongoing.

Microsoft, Novell Expand Alliance with $100M Deal

Microsoft Corp., expanding on an alliance with Novell Inc., has agreed to buy as much as $100 million more for subscription certificates for Novell’s Linux products, Novell said Wednesday.

That comes on top of the $240 million in upfront purchases Microsoft agreed to make when the rival sofware companies announced their alliance in late 2006.

The deal is designed to help Microsoft’s market-leading Windows operating system and the increasingly popular Linux system work together.

Under the deal, Microsoft may sell, reuse or distribute those certificates, which holders can redeem for expanded technical support from Novell, primarily for the company’s SUSE Linux Enterprise Server.

EBay Lowering Fixed-price Sellers’ Listing Fees

EBay Inc is cutting the fees U.S. sellers on its site pay for fixed-price items, in one of the company’s boldest moves this year to boost merchandise for sale, lure new buyers and take on competitors.

Total sellers’ fees will decrease in most cases under eBay’s plan to improve the balance between buyers and sellers on the world’s largest online auction site, and thereby reduce customer defections to rivals such as Amazon.com Inc.

"I’d say this is the most fundamental change we’ve made, ever, to the marketplace," Lorrie Norrington, president of eBay marketplace operations, told Reuters. "It’s a huge shift from where we’ve been."

Instead of charging sellers to list each item separately, eBay will charge 35 cents to list any number of the same types of fixed-price items. Similar changes will be made in Germany and Britain, eBay’s second- and third-largest auction markets.

The move, effective September 16, is a bid to reduce the clutter of similar items on eBay - 100 pairs of white socks will now be sold as a group, for example. The change is timed to boost business heading into the crucial holiday season.

Such items will remain listed for 30 days instead of seven, helping sellers avoid the time-consuming process of re-listing unsold items and lowering the risk of inventory going unsold.

Fixed-price items, which made up 43 percent of merchandise sales on eBay last quarter, often attract newer or less-sophisticated online buyers who don’t want to wait for a multi-day auction to close. EBay says fixed-price sales are popular because they bring in newer, more in-season goods, whether its plasma televisions or the latest video game.

EBay has been trying to attract more buyers as its main auction site has experienced slowing growth in recent years. The novelty of online auctions has waned and rivals like Amazon have muscled in on its turf with strong fixed-price offerings.

"Consumers are voting with their wallets and saying, ’Auctions aren’t really the way I want to buy cosmetics,’ or something like that," said Scot Wingo, chief executive of ChannelAdvisor, a sales consulting firm that advises online merchants who sell through eBay and other sites.

He called eBay’s move a "relatively big change" to make before the holidays that also shows eBay’s new management is willing to look beyond the traditional auction format.

Patti Freeman Evans, research director at Jupiter Research, said given the fast-growing nature of fixed-price sales, eBay’s move is "very opportunistic, but also in line with what their customers are telling them they want."

EBay’s fixed-price focus reflects a shift in e-commerce. Consumers are now more comfortable with Web shopping and barraged with choices, whether it’s auctioneers, retailers or classified sites like craigslist.com promoting bargains online or in stores. Also, sellers often post wares on many sites.

EBay, a San Jose, California-based company with 84 million active users worldwide, said lower listing fees, together with rejiggered back-end fees that will vary according to category, will make it the most competitive fixed-price player.

EBay said an "average" fixed-price seller that once spent $5,000 in eBay fees each year would now spend 11 percent less under the new fee system.

A revamped search engine, which is now being tested and will be introduced in September, will give buyers looking for a specific item options to buy at a fixed price or via auction.

This year, eBay has been taking steps to reward its best sellers and give new incentives to buyers, including coupons.

Fraud protections have been enhanced and upfront listing fees have been cut in favor of fees for successful sales. Sellers with high customer service ratings have won discounts and their goods featured more prominently than other sellers.

Further changes eBay said it would make include a maximum shipping price for sellers in its media category, with incentives to offer free shipping, and requiring sellers to include at least one electronic payment method.

The latter may irritate some small, but vocal, sellers who have objected to recent eBay changes.

"This will be viewed as ’eBay continues to push PayPal down everyone’s throat,"’ Wingo said.

Besides its main auction business, eBay also owns online payments service PayPal and Web-based call service Skype.

Some eBay Sellers Frustrated with Rule Changes

Some people who sell things on eBay are fed up with new rules the company has been imposing in hopes of making the auction site more attractive to online shoppers. Now even more changes are coming in the next few weeks, but this time eBay Inc. hopes it can cool tempers.

Already this year, eBay has tinkered with its fee structure, search results and feedback system. These efforts might be meeting eBay's aims of improving the experience for buyers, but several sellers say their relationship with eBay is worse than ever, and some have left the site entirely.

Jonathan Garriss, executive director of the Professional eBay Sellers Alliance and head of Gotham City Online, which sells shoes on eBay, said his group's members are seeing fewer of their listed items sell, and lower average prices for things that do sell.

EBay has been rejigging its vast Internet marketplace in hopes of turning around a troubling trend: Its number of active users is barely rising. In the most recent quarter, the figure rose 1.4 percent to 84.5 million.

One big change came in January, when eBay altered its complex fee structure and said it was trying to encourage sellers to offer more items for sale, which in turn could attract more buyers.

Generally, eBay cut the fees it charges for listing an item, but raised its commissions on completed sales of products auctioned for less than $1,000 or sold at fixed prices lower than $100. Meanwhile, the company began taking a lesser bite out of higher-end fixed-price sales - as much as 4 percent instead of a previous maximum of 5 percent.

At the time, eBay said more than 60 percent of its sellers would save money under the new rules. But plenty of complaints poured in. EBay responded by cutting listing fees by as much as half for items in its "media" category - such as books and DVDs - that sell for under $25.

Still, many sellers were still unhappy that unlike in the past - when eBay consistently talked of a level playing field for brand-name companies and weekend attic-raiders alike - a new top tier of vendors seems to have an easier time flooding the marketplace.

Under a new "Diamond PowerSeller" plan, the highest-volume merchants may be eligible for reduced fees. One Diamond PowerSeller, Buy.com Inc., is offering so many goods on eBay that many sellers suspect Buy.com is listing items practically for free. EBay won't comment on Buy.com's arrangement.

Buy.com's listings also emphasize eBay's move toward sales with set prices rather than its traditional auction format. EBay says auctions are not going away, but fixed-price sales are the fastest-growing part of the company's marketplace, increasing 60 percent a year.

And more changes are afoot. EBay announced Wednesday that starting Sept. 16, it will let U.S. sellers pay 35 cents to list an unlimited number of identical items at a set price, for a month at a time. Previously, fixed-price listing fees could run as high as $4 per item, and the listings were good for a week.

EBay's president of marketplace operations, Lorrie Norrington, acknowledged there has been "a lot of change" this year. But she said

the company carefully considered the moves and believes they are improving buyers' experience because "the best values from trusted sellers become better and better."

For some sellers, like Michael Knight, who dismantles motorcycles and sells the parts on eBay from Garland, Texas, the sheer volume of recent adjustments has been frustrating.

"I have no control. I have to comply with anything they choose to do and I have no voice in the matter," he said.

Knight would like to move off eBay, but says it's difficult to transfer his listings to another site. Other sites will not easily accept the photos embedded in his item descriptions, and modifying every one of his almost 4,000 listings "is just not practical."

"I'd be giving up a month's income to get that done. That's the only thing that's keeping me on eBay - the inconvenience of leaving," he said.

Bruce Hershenson of West Plains, Miss., had spent 10 years selling vintage movie posters on eBay. Instead he now does that twice a week on his own site, eMoviePoster.com, using technology offered by AuctionAnything.com Inc.

"I talk to other people who have done what I did and they're happy with their decision. They've been able to get their business to the eBay business levels or beyond," Hershenson said.

His poster auctions on eBay had started at 99 cents each, so under the fee structure eBay imposed in January, he would have paid 15 cents to list each poster, down from 20 cents. But his average poster sold for $50, and eBay's take on that sale price would rise to about $3.07, from about $2.12 previously.

Even with a discount he could get by keeping his customer-feedback ratings high, he expected to pay eBay almost $20,000 more per year.

Sellers have also bristled at changes in eBay's feedback policy, one of the site's traditional hallmarks. In the spring, the company removed sellers' ability to leave negative or neutral feedback for buyers, though buyers can still offer negative assessments of sellers. EBay also adjusted its search engine so that items being hawked by people with poorer feedback ratings come up lower in search results.

Some sellers complain that this put them at the mercy of unscrupulous buyers who try to take advantage of the rating system.

"Many times you feel like they're really pushing it to see if you'll give them some kind of a refund," said Bill Cartmel, who sells records on eBay from Lewiston, Maine. "They'll float the suggestion that 'This isn't exactly what I expected.'"

EBay's Norrington said that sellers can report such abuse, and that the company hasn't seen it much.

Even with the rancor, some sellers clearly have benefited from eBay's changes. Steven Holt and his wife, Crystal, who sell DVDs from Denison, Iowa, say they've seen record sales since the spring, when eBay search results began favoring vendors who, like them, have high feedback ratings.

Yet Holt understands why some sellers may be upset. He notes that the uncertain effect of fee changes, combined with an iffy economy, "is naturally going to be a concern."

"When eBay makes these dramatic changes, it can make you very nervous," he said. "But again, eBay is doing what eBay believes it has to do to protect its marketplace."

Microsoft Enlists Seinfeld for Ad Campaign

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld will star in a $300 million marketing campaign for Microsoft Corp aimed at burnishing the image of its computer operating system, a person familiar with the effort said on Thursday.

The centerpiece of that campaign, to debut next month, is a series of television advertisements in which Seinfeld, 54, best known for his eponymous NBC sitcom, will appear with Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, the person told Reuters.

The Wall Street Journal, which first reported details of the marketing effort, said Seinfeld will receive about $10 million for his work.

Seinfeld’s representatives were not immediately available for comment and Redmond, Washington-based computer software giant Microsoft declined to discuss the matter.

But the source who knew of the ad campaign said an immediate goal of the commercials is to counter public perceptions that Windows Vista, Microsoft’s latest PC operating system, is clunky and hard to use compared with rival products from Apple Inc.

The overall objective of the campaign is to rejuvenate the brand image of Windows generally, the source said.

Devised by the Miami-based ad agency Crispin Porter + Bogusky, the spots will employ some variation of the slogan "Windows, Not Walls" and the theme of removing barriers that prevent people and ideas from connecting, the person said.

The ads will begin appearing September 4. The Wall Street Journal said the $300 million marketing campaign is one of the largest in the company’s history.

For now, Seinfeld is the only celebrity, other than Gates, taking part in the campaign, although others were considered, including comic actor Will Ferrell, the source said.

The attempted image overhaul comes in the wake of Apple’s "Mac vs. PC" ads featuring a geeky PC guy who vaguely resembles Gates being unable to keep up with a better-looking, hip Mac counterpart.

Those ads, painting Windows as stodgy and unreliable, have reinforced criticism about Vista’s performance, stringent hardware requirements and lack of support for other software and devices such as printers.

Despite selling more than 180 million licenses since its launch in 2007, Vista continues to suffer from the perception the release was a dud,

although Microsoft has said early problems with the operating system have been resolved.

The Windows operating system is the crown jewel of Microsoft's $60 billion software empire. It sits on more than 90 percent of the world's computers and profits generated from Windows bankroll the company's ventures into new businesses such as Xbox video game machines and Zune music players.

Attention Shoppers: Website Promises Best Deal

U.S. and UK shoppers in the market for a television, dishwasher or other big ticket purchases now have a website that will alert them when the cost of an item they want drops to a target price they have set.

"I'm a consumer advocate. This is the kind of stuff I love," said Edgar Dworsky, a former consumer protection official for the city of Boston and Massachusetts.

Dworsky founded ConsumerWorld.org more than 10 years ago, a non-commercial website aimed at saving consumers money.

For years, airline passengers have been able to set price alerts at sites like Travelocity or Orbitz to be notified when airfares drop, Dworsky said. Now consumers can do the same thing when looking for a flat-panel television or a digital camera.

He set up DealAlerter.com (http://www.DealAlerter.com) powered by PriceGrabber.co.uk (http://www.pricegrabber.co.uk/) to offer shoppers an easier way to find a better deal.

The shopper picks an item and checks its current price range. If prices seem too high, he or she can set a lower target price. The site automatically rechecks store prices daily, and then sends them an email alert if prices drop to or below their target price.

"DealAlerter takes comparison shopping to the next level. It lets the Internet do some of the work for you," he said.

The program used by DealAlerter and PriceGrabber monitors up to 13,000 online stores.

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